

The Killing Of Chuy Muro

— A novel —

by Lance Mason

And Yaweh said unto Cain, "Where is Abel thy brother?"

And Cain said, "I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?"

And Yaweh said, "What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground."

— Gen. IV, ix-x

Chapter One

It was just on nine o'clock under a low, lemon moon, when the paint-faded *cholo* coupé pulled into the Signal station. Chugging out farts of exhaust, the hardtop braked, and, oil-stained rag in hand, I strolled across the oil-stained pavement to greet the driver, Chuy Muro. As I ducked my head below the roofline, he pulled a cut-down 12-gauge from a clip under the dash, launching butterflies in my stomach the size of fruit bats. Then Chuy laid the piece down on the passenger seat, meaning it wasn't a threat to me.

I edged a little closer now, running the rag along the window frame, trying to show Chuy I wasn't afraid. The old Chevy, a '39 low-rider, smelled spicy and damp inside, a mix of Vitalis hair tonic and moldy upholstery. A *mariachi* tune, all trumpets and accordions, spilled out of the hardtop's radio, but Chuy's voice grated over the music like a rusty saw.

"*Qué pasa, chico?* You seen the Zunigas?" Chuy must have figured I'd have seen Victor or Freddie Zuniga if they'd been cruising around town. Was that shotgun some kind of threat to them?

Two empty Falstaff cans rocked around on the Chevy's floor, and smoke rose off a spit-stained Pall Mall stuck between Chuy's white-picket teeth. He wore chuke threads—khaki pants and a plaid flannel shirt buttoned at the neck and cuffs—and his black-marble eyes roamed over my face, still looking for an answer.

"Earlier tonight, a little after I came on," I said. My brother-in-law's station squatted at A and Fifth Streets, the intersection of life, white or brown, for summer nights in Richland. "Victor going home from work. But they ain't been around since." I spoke in English, my Spanish weak, by choice as much as ignorance.

A lot of the chukes—short for *pachuco*—thought I had the lingo because of my best friend Gene. He wasn't the greatest at the old *español*, but he'd yak with a couple of them pretty regular, so they figured he was righteous, which was good for me. We respected Chuy, too, for who and what he was, even if we weren't tight, so we were cool, him and me. Still, this was Richland, and Chuy knew the lay of the land—this was no United Nations meeting.

Chuy looked back through the windshield and studied the world. "Going home, huh?" Had two *vato* brothers, the Zunigas, crossed him somehow, to do with money or a woman? Over honor, more likely. Or maybe Chuy was just showing some night-time *machismo*, part of his hard-ass, *pachuco* style.

"Yep," I said, "just after six."

"Not home now." This wasn't him calling me a liar, just getting the facts straight. He'd been by the Zuniga house, meaning things were straight between them. If Chuy'd been laying to settle some trouble, he wouldn't go to their house, not then, not in our town, and he wouldn't tip his hand by flapping his trap to me about it.

I reckoned they were all in tight on some kind of action, with the weapon just a symbol of mutual strength, of shared power. It *was* a bitchen piece of hardware. I had a close look at it lying there under Chuy's hand, with the walnut stock butt shortened halfway up to the trigger guard, curve-cut to fit against your hip. The oiled-wood forearm held old, blued barrels cut off shorter than anything legal.

After a bit, it looked like Jesús “Chuy” Muro had seen what he'd come for. *“Amigo, no molesta sobre los Zunigas,”* he said. I shouldn't be bothered about the Zuniga boys. *“Stá bueno. Hasta luego.”*

“Yeah, later, *hombre*,” I said, glad to be past any possible trouble.

Chuy and his machine slithered out of the lot and onto A Street, low and cool, with *“El Tortuga”* pin-striped in pink on the car's flat-black trunk. Hanging in the back window, shiny in the moonlight, was the blue-and-silver plaque of the Playboys, a local Latin car club, real bad-asses.

Alone then in the station, I took a long pull on a Dr. Pepper, the sour-sweet bubbles gassing out my nose. My broken back tooth zinged from the cold, and I started thinking about my life. It was near the end of summer, with football double-days starting up, so I had to decide between some roadwork and playing ball with Gene, or bodysurfing and making a run with him down to Mexico for a week. Since spring, I'd been doing this night work at the station, earning extra bread for a trip down to Ensenada before school opened.

Gene and I were hitting the weights, too, and we'd heard Tony Yamashita and the Higgins brothers were bulking up using pills you could buy in Baja drugstores. But Tony's uncle was a doctor, and he pulled us aside and told us the stuff could hurt our livers and make our nuts shrivel up. Still, I guessed a couple of weeks of the stuff wouldn't hurt me. This was years before any news about steroids and gym dope.

Still, there were other stories about Mexico, of guys scoring with American babes down there, important stuff for two hairy-legged teenage boys to know. We couldn't do any better with the chicks, though, than making the football team, and Gene and I had one more year to work on that action before we went off to college or whatever was next. Another idea was to just blow this stinkhole town and make discoveries about life.

That's what we wanted to do, break out and find our lives, the real thing, so we had some big decisions to make. I knew I couldn't figure it all out on my own, but Gene and I had made an agreement about doing it, and doing it together.

Then a voice clattered out of the dark. “Hey! *Señor Eduardo!* What's up?”

It was “Gene on the scene,” and a giggle hit my stomach, a buzz running down my neck as he pimped across the lot in the hip-rolling, walk-and-talk sashay the splibs used. That's what the blacks called themselves around us, *splibs*. “You patty boys need more splibs on your ball team,” they'd say. *Splibs, patties, chukes*. Everybody used street slang to avoid talking about color.

“Hey, gas jockey!” Gene had on his red windbreaker and Levis, giving me his wide smile and devil-may-care shrug. “So, what's the happs, Mr. Ed? Any dollies cruise in tonight?”

“None for you, Regina, but Chuy Muro was here. He just drove out.”

Gene said, “Chuchi was here?” *Chuchi* or *Chuy*—both nicknames for *Jesús*. “What's that wild boy up to?”

“Looking for the Zunigas,” I said. “Had a cut-down 12-gauge on him.”

Gene flinched, staring at me like a little kid, eyes stretched open. Then he shook himself. “You bullshit artist. He didn't have a gun.”

“Fuck if he didn't. He showed it to me plain as day.” We talked tough, but we were just kids.

“And he's after Freddie and Vic?”

"Nah," I said, "he seems cool with them."

"Then who?" Gene was jumpy.

"Don't know. None of my business or he woulda told me."

"That is fucked up, Hot Rod. He might be looking to kill somebody." Gene took life more seriously than I did.

"Scare 'em, more likely," I laughed. "Chuy ain't the killing type."

"You don't know that. Those Playboys don't fuck around."

"That's right, so I ain't calling the cops on him," I said. "I aim to stay cool with Chuy. Cool as I can be, anyway, with a chuke."

Gene looked away, unhappy with the story. "So, no babes through tonight?"

"They like their men tall and studly, Dudley." I had grown four inches since spring and was now taller than Gene. "Besides, Geno Reno, you ain't getting any this century."

He smirked. "You should write comic books."

I swigged the Dr. Pepper. "You working tomorrow?" We worked days in the lemon orchards.

"Hell, yes," he said, "making the big coin. Then his mouth and eyes started dancing. "Hey, did you hear Mandy O'Bryan broke up with Gary Turner?" We were both hot for this girl, so this was big news to us, and we chewed it over until Gene had to go.

"See you in the a.m."

I nodded. "Seven o'clock. Burgers at Topp's."

A salty night breeze drifted off the ocean a mile away, and Gene drifted off toward Fifth Street, feet splayed and shoulders hunched, his James Dean collar turned-up to the wind. Roy Orbison's voice crooned "Only the Lonely" out of the office radio, and part of me wanted to reach out in the dark and pull Gene back. Years later, I still recall that night, Orbison singing, what it meant, and Gene strutting across my memory like a living ghost of the time, our private secret still a part of who we were.

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We go through life with lots of secrets, some big, some small, and Gene and I had plenty of them. Shooting out Christmas lights with a BB gun, hiding fireworks from the cops, boosting shit from the hobby store, once watching through Danny Blackfell's bedroom window while he jerked off after the high school prom—things we kept to ourselves, especially about Danny, since you never knew when you might be in the same boat.

Gene and I went way back, before kindergarten, before we could pee standing up. We were tight as the hide on a horse, and reckoned nothing as weak-kneed or long-winded as an idea could come between us, back in that summer with all its secrets and the trouble they would bring.

Chapter Two

This story happened in the time and space between the hard-working quiet of California in the Fifties and somebody burning a bank because of Vietnam. I didn't witness every episode I'm going to tell about here, but will put the truth down as best I can. What I didn't see directly came from folks who did, or from what back then we'd have called reliable rumors.

During my years inside, I never found the answers to a lot of sad questions I worried over, things about loss that hung across my life like a line of dirty laundry. Still, life is sometimes more about what you lose than what you win and, even before I went down, before the hard years, I didn't have big ambitions for my life. I was a realist, and wasn't carried away with highfalutin ideas about college or business or women, imagining I was making a million dollars or getting it on with Marilyn Monroe. I never did fool myself that way.

Gene, though, he was a different story—an idealist and a dreamer. He was no candy-ass, but he believed in the Golden Rule, and started up about this time having higher expectations for himself. I guess he came to imagine he was cut out for bigger things, for making a better life. This was partly to do with Dr. Katz and his daughter.

But Gene and I had a lot of good years together until, late in the game, differences over right and wrong, over the Chuy Muro business and what lay ahead, divided us. Once this started, painful choices, small-town politics, and our plans getting pulled apart would bring the whole thing to its conclusion in the parking lot of a hamburger joint.

Indeed, secrets can have a special meaning if the two of you are locked inside one, bound together by the private things it hides, and we had one secret bigger than the others, and too painful for the rest of the town to know.

Still, in the meantime, we had some living to do.

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Back when we were kids, people were pouring into the West like starving dogs on a meat truck. Land was cheap, war veterans came looking for jobs, and it was all pretty white-bread America. Yet, by the time the Sixties were in full swing, unpredicted things were happening. The movies and the music gave California its own look and sound, the beatniks and surfers combining to create the hippies, and this all made for a no-holds-barred, only-place-in-the-world sort of feel. Out of this came Free Love and lots more people scrambling around looking for sunny weather and sex and getting high. It seemed to us that no one gave much of a shit about any other place on Earth but here. I might have seen just the beginning of this first-hand, but the news got around.

About the time Gene and I were praying for our first piece of ass, the West Coast was looking pretty sweet to Rhoda from North Dakota—from any place where snow fell by the yard or tornados rearranged the furniture twice a week. Of course, this was when Kennedy was still alive, John Wayne was everybody's hero, and you didn't talk out loud about boys who liked boys.

Old Walter O'Malley had brought the Dodgers to LA a few years before, with Koufax and Drysdale—Maury Wills, too, of course—and beat the White Sox in the '59

Series. Elvis was on the radio day and night, and surf music was just catching hold. But miniskirts and bra-burnings weren't around yet, and sex wasn't there for the asking.

What set us apart from other kids of the time was being born on the Coast, with the ocean always in our heads and in our souls. That difference, that California magic, felt to us like the most important thing in the world and, by the Sixties, millions around the country agreed.

As important as all this was to us, farming was still the biggest thing in Richland. If it failed, everything failed. But the big Pacific brought enough rain, the soil was rich, black bottomland, and the climate was good, never too hot and it never snowed. Farm families, mainly German and Irish Catholics, some Italians, had moved in during the last century. While farming wasn't an easy life for anybody, they owned much of the land and usually controlled the crops and the politics. Gas was still cheap for the machines, and brown people did most of the dirty work, people from Chuy Muro's part of town.

We looked at the world back then with the eyes we were born with, but things were changing, here and around the country, and people generally, me included, didn't see all of it coming. Gene, though, he was different, and maybe Chuy, too.

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Part of becoming a man—not just macho, but a man in control of his world—is to know how close to get to danger. A man approaches danger, maybe even confronts it, only if he reckons he can romance it, or contain it, or back off when things get too hot. Boys, though, are different. A boy throws himself at danger to prove to somebody he can brave the risk and, if it all goes bad, even dodge a bullet. So boys go looking for a fight, and the generals and politicians send them off to war, while the men, careful men, stay home and polish up their futures.

Chuy Muro wasn't a boy anymore, but not a man yet, either. And he was only bad to his enemies, like a knight, like one of those Samurai soldiers in the Japanese movies who, if they're out of work, don't have a purpose in life. He took on trouble to make it right, according to his own code, and drew danger to himself in the no-man's land along the Union Pacific tracks, between the Eastside, with its Spanish-speaking church and Mexican life, and our white side of town west of A Street.

Chuy was straight, in that he wouldn't shoot you in the back, but that doesn't mean he was simple, or that it was easy to see in him what might be coming. Twenty-one or –two, life had wised Chuy up more than most fools and farm kids around Richland. He was a fighter in all his ways, and not just with his fists, though they were hard. There were lots of stories about him, some that tightened up your insides, and some that were weird but funny, like the one about him playing high school football against the boy with the glass eye.

Why did Chuy come into the gas station that night flashing that shotgun around? Well, that was his business, his *secret*, not mine. I'd done some dumb shit stuff as a kid, alone and with Gene, but I hadn't been about to ask Chuy Muro why he was out trying to find the Zunigas with a chopped-off 12-gauge hiding under the dashboard.

A secret is like that, playing a role in your life, in who you are and what you think, but, like Chuy and his business, you don't want to talk about it to just anybody. Secrets are information, and have power, the sort you may want only a certain person to have. Like bargaining chips, secrets can create leverage—"You do what I ask, you play my game, and I keep my mouth shut"—but you can't always predict with some people how it

will work. Some folks will spill them accidentally, while others, like Gene, will take them to the grave. And sometimes secrets just hide you from the pain.